

TITLE OF WORK:

How do you heal?

AUTHOR:

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DESCRIPTION:

An essay response to the prompt: How do you heal? It discusses the importance of self-healing in the practice of medicine, as well as the problem with medical student culture in trying to maintain a state of health. I practice a therapeutic technique learned in my psychiatry rotation exemplifying self-healing and encouraging my peers to do the same.

ARTICLE:

As an aspiring physician, I consider myself a healer. Honestly, medicine originally appealed to me less for the scientific aspect, and more for the humanistic side. I think this is why I find myself drawn to osteopathic medicine. Our profession seems to recognize that healing is an art form, encompassing many components and tools. It is something some people seem to have a natural gift for, like some do painting or playing piano. If you look up the dictionary definition of healing there are some variations. I find myself seemingly stuck on the two variations of the verb. One variation seems to aim directly at the medical profession: "to cause a person to become healthy again." I understand that as a physician, I will heal you. However, the other definition makes me reflect inward: "to become sound or healthy again." Sometimes it's difficult to remember that as a person, I am in need of healing. It's the difference between *I heal you* and *I heal*. So when I'm asked, "how do you heal?" it seems I could take one of two routes in responding. However, I believe that in order to succeed as physicians, as healers, we need to be successful at first healing ourselves.

As medical students, we tend to make our academic work a higher priority than ourselves. We know that our fourth cup of coffee, our chronic sleep deprivation, our dinner of peanut M&Ms, our countless worries about that upcoming exam are not things that help us heal. In fact, as medical students, it seems as though we are in a constant state of "unhealth" due to these choices. We are doing the opposite of healing. We are suffering. Unfortunately, this is our culture. This is the norm as medical students.

I read an article recently about a medical student who committed suicide. When discussing his problems with his family, he said, "my whole class is depressed." It went on to address the, as the article described, "alarming" rates of depression and anxiety among medical students. To me, these rates are not alarming. I know firsthand, as most of you reading probably do, what an environment medical school consists of. It is stressful. It is demanding. It is time-consuming. It is just plain hard. It is the perfect setting for anxiety and depression to flourish.

I think another distinguishing characteristic of our culture as medical students, as future physicians, is to hide our suffering. We think that people will see us suffering and think "I don't trust them to heal me. They aren't even healthy themselves." This person is correct. By sacrificing your wellbeing, you are sacrificing your ability to heal. It doesn't

mean you are inept, but you are not performing the best medicine that you are capable of. Thus, I challenge you to embrace your suffering. In order to find the proper antibiotic, we have to recognize the type of infection. Similarly, in order to heal, we must recognize that we are suffering.

I confess. I am suffering. My mental, physical, emotional health is lacking. I am very much guilty of putting my academics ahead of my wellbeing. So I contemplate the question, “how do I heal?” My answer? I need help. I need support. I need instruction, and I need acceptance.

While I am presently completing my psychiatry rotation, I have constantly been reminded of the importance of mental health. I’m confronted each day with patients who are struggling to battle a variety of issues, including depression and anxiety. In addition, it was recently *National OMS Day of Wellness*, a day in which students were encouraged to take time for themselves, to foster the health of their minds, bodies, and souls. Instead of participating, I found myself experiencing an enormous amount of anxiety that day due to a variety of issues—it was one of those “when it rains, it pours” kind of days.

Just a couple of days later, I was observing a group therapy session for my rotation. The clinician asked the group to write a letter. It was a goodbye letter. Everyone was asked to say goodbye to a part of their life—a hobby, a person, a way of thinking—that had a negative impact, which was not beneficial to their healing. Afterwards, each individual shared what he or she had written. It was as if they were accepting this problem, acknowledging that they needed to fix it, and finally receiving support from the group that they were capable of eliminating this damaging entity. I thought, “what a great activity to assist in healing oneself.” Again you ask, how do I heal? I say goodbye.

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Dear Perfection,

I regret to inform you that you are not real. I grew up hoping that if I worked hard enough, I might meet you one day. You are imaginary, like Santa, the tooth fairy, or the Easter Bunny. Strike that, you are like the boogeyman, the monster under my bed. Believing in you is not beneficial for me. Do you know what it feels like to be so overwhelmed you can’t hold back the tears, to be so upset the only things that you can muster out of your mouth are negative statements? Of course not. You are Perfection. But like I said, you are not real.

Perfection, your illusion has been with me since my childhood. Remember that day I just missed you while coloring? You left my sights as I stomped up the stairs, explaining to my parents that I’d screwed up. I’d colored outside the lines. How about that time during my senior year of college when I broke down in front of my doctor because I couldn’t control my depression anymore? Were you there the time I had to CAP my block 3 anatomy exam in medical school? No. It’s not that I didn’t try to find you. Oh no, I searched so hard. I know now that it’s impossible to find something that doesn’t exist.

I am sorry to admit I have put my faith in you above my health for so long. You have caused me a lot of self-loathing. You have caused me many tears. I acknowledge the fact that my belief in you has helped me achieve many great things. However, I think the difference now is that I realize I am capable of greatness without perfection, without you. So this is where we part. I know you won't miss me. Unfortunately, you still have a lot of other people that believe in you. I hope one day they learn too.

*Sincerely,
Abby*

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We are all suffering to some degree. Life is not easy. Medicine is a hugely rewarding career, but it certainly takes its toll. We may be medical students, professionals, but firstly we are human. If these strangers I witness in a group therapy are able to show their vulnerability with such a positive outcome, why can't we? Be vulnerable. Be supportive. Heal.